

GREAT START — THEN BLUES LET IT SLIP

ROTHMANS Isthmian League champions Wycombe Wanderers created enough chances to have inflicted the first defeat on Division One leaders Leatherhead at Fetcham Grove on Tuesday night. They started brilliantly, went one up after six minutes but then were rocked by two second half goals.

This game, between two of the leading sides in the league, was undoubtedly the best value for supporters so far this term. Exciting, attacking football flourished and the standard of soccer over the 90 minutes was excellent.

Wycombe must have been disappointed with their defeat. I felt they deserved a draw on their showing, but as always, they had enough chances to have won the game by a clear two goals. They carved out several more scoring opportunities than their opponents but just couldn't put them away.

Leatherhead are now the only unbeaten side in the Division, Ilford having lost 0-1 at Enfield on Tuesday. The 'Tanners' are a fine side this term. They have strength at the back starting with John Swannell, the ex-England goalkeeper and one of the best attacks around. Their only weakness is in midfield.

Terry Reardon came in for his first full 90 minutes, with Graham Mackenzie dropping to substitute and this change certainly improved the Blues' midfield. Reardon got through a good deal of work but his main advantage was the ability to win the ball. It was one of the few occasions this season the Wycombe's midfield trio looked superior to the opposition's.

CONTRASTING

There were contrasting performances in the visitors' defence. Alan Phillips played a captain's role, and was a dominating force at centre half, but Keith Mead was given a torrid time by the skilful Johnny Doyle, who managed to get the ball past him on several occasions. Goalkeeper John Maskell pulled out a couple of superb saves in the second half and didn't deserve to finish on the losing side.

The overall performance of Wycombe makes a mockery of Saturday's result at Marlow in the F.A. Cup. I suppose the players were motivated by playing against the league leaders and they seemed a completely different team all round.

Wanderers started the game at a cracking pace and looked like overwhelming their opponents in the opening quarter. Leatherhead, not anticipating such a storm, had no answer to the lightning attacks and were fortunate to concede only one goal during this spell.

Combining superbly, Wanderers created their first goal chance after only three minutes when a series of passes gave Dylan Evans a half chance but Swannell raced out off his line and dived at the striker's feet.

Keith Searle, who has been struggling to find his top form, began the match like a rocket. Soaring above Dave Reid, the Tanners centre half, his controlled heading gave the home side a real drilling early on. He almost laid on a goal for Howard Kennedy after four minutes then 60 seconds later, Swannell pulled out a wonder save from Holifield. A run and cross from the bye-line by Evans cut a large gap in the Leatherhead defence. The ball rolled right into Holifield's path and he hammered the ball viciously towards the net. Swannell, again shot off his line, and somehow managed to get his body in the way to stop a certain goal. The ball in these situations can go anywhere. For Leatherhead it fell just right for the clearance. For Wycombe, later in the game, it fell just right for the home side's winning goal.

Wanderers kept surging forward in search of an early goal and were rewarded from the second corner of the match. The flag kick was cleared back to Kennedy who returned the ball to the near post. Searle, losing Reid, leapt high and rammed a close range header firmly into the net for a superb goal.

Wanderers' lead was richly deserved. Leatherhead had only troubled Maskell twice in the first 15 minutes and the quarter almost exclusively belonged to Wycombe.

With Phillips playing by far his best game of the season and Dave Bullock making some timely tackles and interceptions, the threat of Chris Kelly was easily subdued. Wycombe hit back again in the 23rd minute — again to be foiled by Swannell. Kennedy produced a touch of real class to send one player the wrong way in midfield and then played a 1-2 with Searle.

Receiving the ball again he then sent a cutting pass right through the heart of the home defence to Perrin. For the third time Swannell was forced to sprout off his line and met the ball just as Perrin drove in his shot.

Leatherhead, whose own attacks had been breaking down through a poor standard of passing, mounted several raids in the closing stages of the half. Willie Smith curled in a menacing free kick that was cleared for a corner and then Doyle missed a golden chance when John Cooper, crossed on the volley.

Although Wycombe faded in the later stages of the first half, there was no doubt they deserved their interval lead and in the

first few minutes of the second period it seemed they would go further ahead.

EQUALISER

The speedy Holifield raced half the length of the field only to be robbed on a shot at the expense of a corner and then the same player crashed in a drive of tremendous power a minute later. Searle laid the ball wide and Holifield, running in at full pelt, hammered in a drive which cannoned just past the post with Swannell diving full length.

But in the 54th minute, Leatherhead, who again had hardly been seen in the early minutes of the half, hit back to equalise. The goal was somewhat fortunate for there seemed to be no danger as Wanderers tried to clear the ball in their own area. A clearance, however, struck Mead and then bounced right into the path of Pete Lavers. Having scored seven goals already this term, Lavers made the task of rounding Maskell look easy.

Wycombe raced back into attack and immediately forced two corners. Then a break by Holifield again almost put the Blues back in front. Running through on the blind side of the defence, only a desperate tackle prevented another goal.

In the 70th minute Wycombe had another chance to go ahead when a fine cross from Kennedy fell to Mead five yards out, but the full back delayed his shot and then drove the ball high over the top.

Five minutes later, Maskell produced the best save of the night — and there were several excellent stops by both 'keepers. Kelly was tightly marked by Gary Hand at the corner flag but jinked his way out of trouble and curled in a cross. Wycombe, stretched to the limit at the back, left Lavers unmarked and just as his header seemed to be entering the net, Maskell flung himself to his left and palmed the ball aside. A minute later Maskell saved again from Lavers.

The danger signs were there for Wycombe as Leatherhead began to look increasingly menacing. They were fighting harder than at any time in the match and with a wealth of possession, were using the ball well. In the 81st minute they snatched the lead with a breakaway. Perrin lost possession in the home half and Cooper raced away down the flank. Cutting in, he let fly with full power only to see Maskell parry the ball. It fell just right for Kelly to knock the ball home on his favourite left foot.

There was no stopping Leatherhead now. Inspired by the second goal they rattled Wycombe with a string of dangerous raids and it took the Blues a good five minutes to recover. To their credit, they did come back in the last few minutes but they were unable to reply.

LEATHERHEAD: J. Swannell, D. Sergeant, B. Webb, D. Reid, P. Dade (sub D. Wells 71 mins), W. Smith, C. Woffinden, J. Cooper, C. Kelly, P. Lavers, J. Doyle.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell, K. Mead, A. Phillips, D. Bullock, G. Hand, H. Kennedy, T. Reardon, M. Holifield, D. Evans, K. Searle, S. Perrin, Sub. G. Mackenzie.

Referee: T. Maber (Middlesex).
Half-time: 0-1. **Goalscorers:** Leatherhead — Lavers (54), Kelly (81), Wycombe — Searle (6).